

run away with my love by thenewromantics

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M, Runaway - AU, but this is the mike/el/hop family unit story that we all deserve, the other characters are mentioned, well kind of?, you'll see - Freeform

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Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Jim "Chief" Hopper & Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

when mike left, he was desperate to find anything better. he certainly never meant to fall in love. but, life works in mysterious ways and sometimes it sends you right into the place you're meant to be without you noticing.

aka mike + el meet at a bus station.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

i know, i know, i haven't finished cutting edge yet but i just...don't have inspiration for it. meanwhile this fic came to me a couple days ago and i knew i needed to write it. it's not going to be super long and i have a lot of it mapped out already, so hopefully that means updates will come quickly!

quick shoutout to theparanoidergosphere for being such a wonderful cheerleader!

November 7, 1987

He's only vaguely aware of how violently his leg is shaking.

According to the large clock on the opposite wall, it's only minutes away from midnight, which means he only has a little bit of time left to figure out what the hell he's doing before he's stuck spending the night on the street.

He feels as though his senses are getting duller the longer that he sits here. His vision has blurred, the people around him become masses of various colors rather than human beings. Noises sound far away; the jingling of someone's keys, the clicking of high heels against linoleum and the humming of the vending machine in the corner all seem like they're happening miles away.

Not to mention the thirty dollars in his pockets feels like lead against his hip.

That was all he had, thirty dollars to his name and his backpack, stuffed with the things he didn't think he could live without. A small stuffed elephant that had been a fifth birthday present, his favorite Star Wars t shirt, and for some reason, Roary, his toy dinosaur, all sat like weights in the only thing he had thought to bring with him when he left.

He didn't regret leaving though.

Things had been different, bad different, ever since what happened with his mom and Holly the past winter. Sure, Mike and his dad had never been close but this had pulled them impossibly further apart. The Wheeler house, which once had been warm and alive with laughter and the running footsteps of three kids who always had somewhere to be, was now silent, still and cold. Nancy, who had been living in France in a desperate attempt to escape Hawkins and their family (not that he could blame her), had come home briefly for the funeral, but eventually she had returned to her life with a squeeze of Mike's shoulders and a promise that she would come home again soon. That had been almost three months ago.

Which left Mike with his dad.

This meant that dinners, which had once been full family affairs with plates of homemade food, were now lukewarm tv dinners, and the house was always dark and empty when Mike came home from school. Sometimes his dad didn't even come home, needing to be out of town for work, which left Mike alone.

Mike couldn't even remember the last time him and his dad had spoken more than four words to each other at a time.

In fact, it had been with with a gruff hand on his shoulder and a monotone, "see you tomorrow, son" this morning that Mike had made his decision. So, when he arrived home from school that day, guilt rising in his throat like bile at waving goodbye to his friends at the end of Maple Street, that he packed his bag, shoved all the money he could find in his pockets and left, only barely giving the place that had been home for the last sixteen years a second glance.

Now that he was here, his bike abandoned somewhere back out the outskirts of Hawkins, when had hitched a ride with a nice man with a big truck, he realized how crazy and rash it all seemed. He was only sixteen years old and he was a runaway. He had never felt more free though.

He was sick and tired of everything in that town reminding him of the mother and sister that he had lost too soon. He was tired of the

cold and empty house that had once been the safest place he could be, reminding him of the love his father didn't, and never would, have for him. He hated thinking every time he turned down the hallway at school that his sister's familiar head of dark brown curls would be there, even though she was thousands of miles away.

He was sick and tired of people leaving him. At this point, there was no one left to miss him.

Leaving was the easy part, it was figuring out what he was supposed to do now that was making him anxious.

Every destination they had announced over the loudspeaker sounded wrong and caused him to wring his fingers together. Chicago sounded too big and intimidating, Pawnee too small and remote, everything sounded wrong. He didn't have many options left though, the last bus left in five minutes and then he would be stuck.

He had felt stuck for months, he didn't know how much longer he would be able to handle it.

Deciding to just wait until the last boarding call to make any kind of move, worse comes to worse he can take the last bus, wherever it goes, and switch buses at the next stop, he wipes his eyes. He's getting sleepy, and his eyes are blurry and cloudy.

When he opens them again, there's a girl standing in front of him.

He swears he's hallucinating.

The first thing he notices about her is the bright pink overalls that she's wearing. They bunch at her waist and flare out against the stark white of her converse, which matches perfectly with the white turtleneck she's wearing.

The second thing he notices is that she's staring at him. It makes him feel unsettled for a moment, but the feeling flashes away before he has time to ruminate on it, because somehow, the way she's looking at him doesn't make him feel uneasy. It makes him feel, warm, almost.

There's a small crinkle in her eyebrows and her amber eyes are wide

and bright. Her lips are quirked slightly, and Mike has a distinct feeling that she's holding back a smile. The curve of her lips is paired with a light blush on her cheeks and it makes Mike gulp.

The third and final thing he notices is that she might be the prettiest girl he's ever seen in his life. Which is part of the reason he thinks he might be hallucinating. He didn't think it was possible for girls this pretty to even exist, let alone that there were girls this pretty that noticed him.

"Hi." The girl says after a moment, the curl of her lips breaking out into a full smile. "Do you mind if I sit there?" She points to the empty seat on the bench next to him and Mike can only look at her dumbfounded before she sits down. He tries not to think about how her shoulders are almost brushing up against his, despite how there's literally no one else in the entire terminal, let alone on the bench with them.

Mike isn't sure exactly what this girl wants from him, she doesn't look like someone who would try and like, mug, him or something, but looks can be deceiving. However, she might be disappointed if she tried to mug him and realized how little he had to offer. Before he can even begin to form any kind of thought in his mind, the girl is speaking to him again.

"I've been watching you for a while now." She says simply. Mike feels his eyes widen to the size of saucers, unsure of what he feels more, nervous because apparently some girl he didn't know had been watching him and he didn't notice, or embarrassed that apparently he was acting so odd that he caught the attention of someone.

So much for being inconspicuous.

This girl, whose strawberry shampoo he can now smell *very* clearly because of how close she is to him, must sense his uneasiness because she quickly shakes her head, looking embarrassed at her choice of words.

"I didn't mean that in a creepy way for a while, I work over there." She points to the coffee and newspaper stand that's settled on the other side of the terminal between the bathrooms and one of the

doors. "I noticed you when you came in, and you haven't moved in hours. I saw you with your eyes closed at one point and I was afraid something had happened, but then I noticed that your leg was still bouncing."

As if on cue, Mike and the girl both direct the attention to his left, which is still bouncing up and down, the small collection of quarters and dimes he has in his pocket jingling softly. He can see her grinning out of the corner of his eye, and he feels the back of his neck burn. He again, feels like he should say something, but the girl keeps going, almost as if she expects him not to say anything.

"I picked you out right away." Her voice is softer now, and it makes his heartbeat quicken in his chest. "I've seen plenty of people like you come through here. People who don't know where they're going but don't want to go back to where they came from." She says the whole thing so simply that it nearly gives Mike chills.

"Do you come up and talk to all of them like this?" The low register of his voice surprises him and he has to clear his throat. "I mean, do you always come and tell them this?"

The girl laughs at that, a small, light sound that nearly makes him smile. "No, only the pretty ones." The smile on her face shifts into a small smirk and Mike swears that she's flirting with him. Now his entire face is flush with embarrassment.

He had run away from home and now a pretty girl was maybe flirting with him in a nearly empty bus station. This was by far the weirdest day of his entire life.

"Well, since you see so many of us, do you have any advice?" He chuckles nervously, rubbing the palms of his hands roughly against the material of his corduroys. "I think I missed my last chance to actually catch a bus."

Mike has no idea how long him and this girl have been sitting together, it seems like time has slowed down since she sat down, but he has a pretty good feeling that the last bus is long gone. If the fact that him, this girl, and the night security guard - who's dozing off behind the counter - are the only ones left in the entire terminal is

any indication.

The girl considers this for a second, her mouth crinkling to one side as she thinks. Mike genuinely can't tell if she's really thinking or only pretending to, but she's silent for what feels like eternity before she smiles.

"I have an idea and this is going to sound crazy, but why don't you come and stay with me tonight." Mike's eyes widened and the girl shakes her head. "I know, I said it was crazy, but come on, it's past midnight, and if we don't get out of here soon we're gonna be locked in here."

The girl stands, giving him a small smile as she holds out her hand to him. "I promise that I don't bite, I'll explain more when we get outside."

Mike can't argue with her too much there, he really doesn't want to spend his night locked in a bus terminal. So he grabs her hand and lets her lead him out onto the streets of Indianapolis. There are barely any people around, and there's a light chill to the air, making him shiver. She looks unfazed.

"Look, I know I must sound crazy just inviting you, a complete stranger, to come and stay at my house. But, I really wouldn't feel right just leaving you there." The sincerity of her words makes Mike's heart swell and he can't help but smile a little bit.

"Thanks, but I hardly feel like I can impose." Really the last thing Mike needs to do is spend another night feeling like a burden, which is all he seems to feel like living under the same roof as his father. "I don't want you to feel like obligated to take care of me because you feel bad for me."

"I don't feel bad for you." She says, rolling her eyes. Mike gulps. "And I promise you're not imposing. It's just me and my dad and we have an extra room." She shrugs. "I have to come back tomorrow to work, so I can bring you back here and you can go wherever it is that you want to go."

Mike can't help but admit that sleeping in an actual bed instead of a

bench, or the ground, does sound impossibly appealing. But, he still feels uneasy about this girl feeling like she has to take him home and take care of him.

“Look, if you really don’t want to come, I’m not going to force you. But, I think you deserve a warm bed to sleep in tonight and I really don’t mind offering you one. And I promise that my dad won’t mind either, he’s pretty cool about stuff like this.” He doesn’t know what she says differently this time, but at her words, he feels himself nodding.

“I mean, if you really don’t mind. I don’t want to invade your home.” The girl rolls her eyes again, this time so hard that Mike’s afraid they’re going to fall out of her head.

“I promise.” She says. “I don’t mind at all.”

“Then, alright. Thank you.” Mike’s not really sure what exactly compels him to say yes, maybe it’s the girl’s warm brown eyes, or her bright smile. But he feels a little lighter as he follows her into the nearest parking garage.

They walk in silence for a few moments, the girl looking over at him every couple seconds, no doubt to see if he’s still with her. He smiles at her.

“Thank you, again.” He says when they stop by a small brown car that looks like it’s seen hundreds of better days. “I mean, you really don’t have to do this. I’m just some random guy you met in a bus station, I could be a murderer or something.” He winces, *why the fuck did he say that of all things* .

“Well are you?” She looks confused, and even slightly concerned, no doubt wondering where his words had come from but he just shakes his head.

“No, I don’t know why I said that.” She laughs, and this time it’s loud, echoing around the concrete of the parking garage. The sound sends shivers down his spine and for some reason all he wants to do is say something else to make her laugh like that again.

“Well, I should tell you. I have a pretty good knack for reading people. And I think I got a pretty good read off of you the minute I saw you.”

“Oh yeah, what’s that?” He’s almost scared to ask, but ultimately he’s far more curious than anything else.

“That you’re lost, and you’re looking for the right place to go.”

Her words hit him like a large ocean wave and he almost feels as though his chest is going to cave in. She must be able to sense the effect her words have on him because her face falls.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean -”

“No, it’s okay.” He gently interrupts, giving her a small smile. She returns it, still looking slightly embarrassed, avoiding eye contact. “I’m ready if you are.” He adds on, trying to change the subject.

“Oh yes, me too.” Her smile grows and the previous awkward moment disappears in a cloud of smoke. Mike is ready to open the passenger door to the car before the girl grabs his attention once more. “Oh wait, before I forget,” he pauses, looking at her, “my name is El.”

He grins, *El*, god even her name is pretty. “Well, El. I’m Mike.”

There’s a moment where something, something that Mike has no idea how to define, passes between them. Mike is smiling at her and she’s returning his grin and it seems as though neither one of them is rushing to break it. Eventually, a loud honk from the streets below pulls both of them out of it and El looks embarrassed and Mike can feel his skin tingling.

“Let’s go, my dad will flip if I don’t get home soon.” El says, getting into the car. Mike hovers over the door handle, briefly wondering if this is really the right decision, but then he catches sight of El in the car and he feels himself smile. And as he opens the door, he sure that this is what he’s supposed to be doing.

He doesn’t know exactly what to expect, but nervous excitement is bubbling in his stomach and he knows everything is going to be okay.

Notes for the Chapter:

not a super long start, but the chapters will get longer i promise! let me know what your thoughts! :)

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

and we're here with chapter two!!

i wanna thank everyone who commented and left kudos on the first chapter of this, it's all your lovely support and kind words that encouraged me to get this done. it might have taken a little longer then i expected, but it's here. with that, i apologize for being so late with this, i was away last weekend and super tired and busy this week that it took way longer then i expected to crank this out.

very special thank you to ally (theparanoidergosphere) for being my personal fic cheerleader.

anyways, let's get on with it, enjoy!!

November 7 + 8, 1987

They've been driving for about twenty minutes when the realization of what Mike had just done begins to sink in. He can only sit there in slightly shell shocked silence as Indianapolis fades in the distance and they enter a small, homey neighborhood. Due to the late hour, there aren't many other cars on the road, which only seems to make the silence even more deafening.

He *ran away* from home.

He *got into* a stranger's car.

He's on his way to *spend the night* in previously mentioned stranger's house.

Before today, the craziest thing Mike had ever done is line up hours before the release of the final Star Wars movie back in '83 with the rest of the guys. He definitely thinks that this might just be a little crazier.

Despite all that though, he still can't bring himself to regret any of it.

If El has any indication that he's mentally freaking, she doesn't show it. Mike sneaks a glance at her at one point and she's focused on the road, humming some pop song that he's pretty sure his sister used to listen to under her breath. He's grateful for it.

A couple minutes later she slows down and pulls up in front a modest looking home with a large tree in the front. There's a police cruiser parked in the driveway and Mike feels his blood pressure begin to rise. His leg starts bouncing.

"My dad's the police chief." She says, a small smile on her face. It's almost like she had read his mind. While that calms him down a little bit, no one is here because they're looking for him or anything like that, his leg continues to bounce.

"Your dad's a police officer?" His voice betrays him by being about four pitches higher than normal. "Is he going to be okay with this?"

El shrugs, looking at the front door. There's a dim light in the front window and Mike can see the television playing some sports game. "I've never brought any strays home with me before, but considering everything that's happened to me, I think he'll be fine with it."

Mike doesn't quite know what she means when she says "everything that's happened" to her, but she has a weird look on her face that tells him she probably doesn't want to talk about it, so he doesn't ask. He swallows roughly, giving her a forced smile and a nod.

"And besides, I'm pro at winning arguments with my dad at this point, if he even tries to fight me, he'll regret it." This time she's smile, a hint of something akin to mischief in her eyes and Mike can't resist the chuckle that falls from his lips. "I promise I won't let anything happen to you, even if he says no I'll sneak you into my room after he falls asleep."

She says the words so bluntly that Mike almost chokes on air.

He's never spent the night in a bedroom that didn't belong to him or one of his friends, the fact that he's going to be spending this one a

stranger's guest room was weird enough. The mere idea of sleeping in a room that belonged to a pretty girl, let alone a girl as pretty as El was (and boy was she) was enough to make his palms sweat and his heart thump loudly in his chest.

"Well, he's gonna get all weird and confused if we stay out here much longer, you ready?" Mike nods wordlessly. He can feel his skin going cold and he no doubt looks paler than usual. El seems to notice this and reaches out, patting his hand. "I promise, it's gonna be okay."

And like earlier, when her words seemed to be all he needed, he smiled, suddenly feeling far less nervous.

"Yeah, I think I'm ready."

She smiles, and opens the car, disappearing around the front of the car and up the walkway. Mike watches her for a moment, a small grin on his face. He waits a couple seconds before pushing his own door and following her.

Jim Hopper liked to think that he was a reasonable man. Especially when it came to raising his teenage daughter.

He had allowed her to take that weekend job that kept her out past midnight. He always let her best friend, Max, come over without asking first and without any questions. He never lectured her on her grades or forced her to show him her completed homework. He never asked her to turn her music down, never tried to tell her what to wear.

So yeah, Jim Hopper liked to think that he was a reasonable father.

That was until said teenage daughter decided to bring a teenage boy home with her one night. And not just any teenage boy, a teenage boy with whom Jim had never had the pleasure of meeting before.

Friday night started out like any other Friday night. He got home

from work right after nine o'clock. He had one beer along with one piece of the traditional Friday night lasagna, put the rest in the oven on low to keep warm for El, and sat down to watch the week's sports highlights while he waited for her to get home.

Typically El was home at about 12:20, give or take how much clean up there was, but it was never later than 12:25. She was always in the door before the 12:30 sports news started. So, the first sign to Jim that tonight was *not* a typical Friday night was when 12:20 hit and there was no sign of El.

Not a big deal , he thought absentmindedly, only a little worried. Maybe she'd had to clean up a lot of stuff, maybe there had been unexpected traffic coming out of the city. He was willing to explain it away, at least for a couple more minutes.

The second sign was when El did get home at about 12:30, she stayed in her car. Usually El was like clock work, park her car in front of the house, kill the ignition three seconds later, get out of the car about five seconds later, walk up the walkway and be in the house about thirty seconds after initially parking her car.

Tonight however, she didn't get out of the car after killing the ignition. Jim didn't think too much of it though. Maybe she had spilled something in the back and was trying to pick it up, maybe she was trying to organize her tapes so they were in the right place tomorrow. It was strange, but not weird enough to put him out of sorts.

The third sign was hearing not one, but two steps of footsteps coming up the path. He could hear the familiar light thump of El's converse, but they were paired with another set that he couldn't identify right away.

Again, it was strange, but Jim assumed that it was probably Max. It wasn't completely uncommon for El to bring Max home with her on Friday nights, if her step dad was in a bad mood, or Billy had decided to show his face for the weekend. So while it wasn't how it usually went, he had a logical explanation for it.

The fourth and final sign, and the sign that had Jim jumping up from

the couch was the additional voice that he heard when the door finally opened, didn't belong to Max. Oh no, it didn't belong to Max at all. It was low and deep and definitively *boy*.

"Dad! I'm home!" El's familiar greeting rang out moments later, but unlike most evenings when Hopper was still on the couch, this time he was in the doorway of the entryway as the words left her mouth. A small smug smile was on her face as she caught sight of him.

Little shit.

"Oh, hi dad." Hopper simply gave El a nod before directing attention to the boy standing next to her. The boy who was gripping the strap of backpack with white knuckles and looked like he was going to pass out any minute.

"Who are you?" Hopper asked, giving the boy a pointed look. The boy gulped and Hopper could see him rocking anxiously back and forth on his feet. If Hopper didn't know any better he would think this boy was some kind of criminal who he was questioning.

"Dad, this is Mike." El said, even though Hopper hadn't asked her. The boy simply nodded, a terrified look on his face. The boy's eyes were wide and Hopper could practically feel the fear and anxiety.

It was in that moment when Hopper took a deep breath and made a decision.

"Nice to meet you, Mike." Hopper said, giving the kid, Mike, a nod. He wasn't really one for handshakes, so he settled for reaching out and clapping him on the shoulder.

He could see El beaming out of the corner of his eye. Mike however, looked confused and still slightly terrified, but he wasn't moving around as much anymore and his grip seemed to have loosened on his backpack strap. Hopper considered this as much as a victory as anything else.

"It's getting pretty late. Mike, why don't you go up and take a shower. Towels are behind the door. When you're done, El can show you where the guest bedroom is."

Mike still looked confused, but Hopper could see his shoulders drop, like he let out a breath that he was holding and he gave Hopper a shaky smile.

“Uh, thank you, um, sir. I really appreciate it.” Hopper had to admit that he liked that the kid had manners. “You don’t have to do this but I really appreciate it, I don’t even need to actually stay, I can leave. I really appreciate it though.”

Hopper had to resist the urge to roll his eyes, kid sure could ramble.

“Mike, it’s fine. Go upstairs.” With that, Mike nodded, ducking his head down, a moving as quickly as he could out of the entryway and up the stairs. As soon as Mike had disappeared out of sight and was making noise in the upstairs bathroom, Hopper rounded on his daughter.

El was still standing there looking as unashamed as ever.

“El.”

She smiled at him, one of her hands reaching up to twirl a section of her hair. Hopper knew that look and as much sympathy as he had for the kid, he didn’t think El could get away with letting strange teenage boys come over to their house.

“Wanna explain to me what the hell that was all about?” El’s face fell slightly and Hopper crossed his arms across his chest, his eyebrows raised.

“Dad, you should have seen him.” El’s voice was quiet and not for the first time that night, Hopper’s heart twisted in his chest. “I’ve never seen someone look so sad and alone before.”

There was a moment of silence between them, El looking pensive, her bottom lip between her teeth. Hopper, on the other hand, was reflecting back to just a couple years ago when he had thought the same thing about El and had brought her home with him.

Like father, like daughter.

“El, you know why I’m upset about this right?” Hopper asked,

leaning down slightly so he could look her in the eyes. His hands were on either of her shoulders, the usual stance he took when he was telling her something important and she nodded.

“Because he’s a stranger and we shouldn’t invite strangers over.” She pursed her lips. “And because even though it seems like everything is over, we need to be careful.”

Hopper nodded. “Exactly.” He moved one hand from her shoulder to ruffle her hair softly. “I appreciate that you have a good heart, kiddo, but we just gotta always be careful.”

“I know, I know.” El sighed. “But, I think that I can trust him.”

“What do you see when you look at him?” Hopper knew what El was talking about. He knew better than anyone that her ability to read people was like a sixth sense, or a superpower. Hell, sometimes he wished she worked down at the station with him so she could tell him if people were dirty criminals or not.

“I see someone who’s lost and alone and scared.” El’s voice cracked. “I see someone who just needs a place to go.”

She smiled sadly at him and Hopper gulped. Upstairs, he heard the shower shut off and he squared his shoulders. El was looking at him, her eyes wide. He knew that look.

“Go upstairs, show Mike where the guest room is and tell him we’ll talk about everything in the morning.” El nodded, quickly disappearing up the stairs. Hopper watched after her, his heart squeezing in his chest.

Hopper knew what he had to do.

When Mike woke up in the morning, at first he thought everything that had happened - the bus station, El, her scary father - had all been a dream. Waking up in a warm bed, staring at a blank white wall was

something that Mike had become accustomed to, so when this particular morning started exactly the same, he didn't think much of it.

But then, he rolled over, and with a slight panic, he sat up in bed.

For, he wasn't in this familiar childhood bedroom, with its Star Wars posters, and academic trophies and various other knickknacks he's acquired over the years. No, instead the walls of this room are blank, sans for a small picture of some landscape, and the only thing in here that belongs to him is the backpack that sits on a rocking chair in the corner, a towel thrown haphazardly across the back.

There's a brief moment where all he hears is his mother's voice in his ear, telling him to *"hang up your wet towel, Michael, please"* but he pushes the voice away with tear filled eyes with a shake of his head. Then the realization hits him, *none* of that has been a dream.

It all came back to him like a tidal wave.

He remembered his father's empty words at the breakfast table just yesterday, it felt more like ages, and the unaffectionate squeeze to his shoulder, unlike the squeeze he had gotten from El's father, which had been firm and reassuring. He remembered, with a tinge of guilt and sadness, the smiles of his friends as he waved goodbye to them as they parted. No doubt the phone at the Wheeler house would ring soon with Dustin or Lucas or Will on the other end, excitedly asking Mike to join them at the arcade or Castle Byers.

Too bad no one would be there to answer it.

Then his thoughts moved to El. El, who had brought him into her home and invited him to stay, even if just for a night. El, who hadn't judged or questioned him, just offered him her understanding. El, with her kind eyes and bright smile.

He remembered, rather sheepishly, with a deep, warm blush splaying across his cheeks and back, the smile she had given him when she had knocked on the bathroom door. He had been embarrassed then, his pale skin turning bright red under her gaze as he desperately gripped the towel around his waist, praying that it wouldn't fall. El

hadn't seemed to notice his embarrassment, merely guiding him to the guest bedroom and telling him to "*sleep well*" with a small grin.

(Honestly, El was probably the biggest reason he thought he was dreaming. Sure, it was crazy to think that he had run away from home, something he had never even thought of before. But there was absolutely *no* reality that Mike could conceptualize where a pretty girl, no scratch that, a downright beautiful girl, like El would ever give him the time of day, let alone smile at him the way she had).

A shiver ran down his spine at the mere memory of it. God, he wanted her to smile at him like that again.

Downstairs he heard a laugh, a deep and booming one. El's dad.

El had told him the night before that her dad wanted to talk to him in the morning, no doubt to find out what happened and subsequently send him back to his dad. That's what any normal adult would do, especially one who was a literal cop. With a slight panic, Mike tried to remember if running away from home was illegal, oh god, he was pretty sure it was. Did this mean he was going to be arrested?

Deciding to just get this over with, Mike pushed himself up from the bed, groaning when his feet hit the cold hardwood. The small clock on the bedside table told him that it was almost nine, and his stomach growled loudly. He hoped that El's dad would at least maybe give him something to eat because shoving him in the back of his cruiser and transporting him back to Hawkins.

Throwing on his jeans from yesterday, Mike made sure that all his stuff was in his backpack before shouldering it and quickly exiting the bedroom and going downstairs.

He followed the noises of soft conversation through the house and into the kitchen. There he found El and her dad, helpings of eggs and bacon and waffles spread out on the table in front of them. His mouth watered at the sight.

"Mike! You're up!" El exclaimed when she saw him, giving him a wide smile. Mike couldn't help but grin back at her, his heart picking up pace in his chest. "Did you sleep alright?"

“Y-y-yeah.” Mike said, mentally kicking himself for apparently not being able to talk like a normal human being. But really, it wasn’t his fault that El was impossibly gorgeous for nine o’clock in the morning that it literally rendered him speechless. That was on her, not him.

“Good. I’m very glad to hear it.” At this point Mike was pretty sure he was just standing there staring and smiling at her like an absolute idiot. He, also, probably would have continued to do so if her dad didn’t clear his throat from his place at the counter.

Both teenagers jumped slightly, El recovering quickly and spinning in her chair to look at her dad while Mike had to take a small breath before directing his attention to the burly police chief who, despite his kindness yesterday, Mike was still *very* much afraid of.

“El, can you give me and your pal, Mike, a couple minutes to talk.” The words weren’t spoken as a question, but El still nodded and got up from her seat. When she passed Mike on her way out of the kitchen, she gave him a small, reassuring smile.

“You’ll be fine, I promise.” She whispered, reaching out and squeezing his arm. Even though he wasn’t quite sure he believed her, her words did bring him comfort and he relaxed his shoulders a little bit as she left the room. However, now he was left alone with her scary dad, and he was pretty much totally terrified.

“You hungry?” Her dad asked, gesturing to the food in front of him. “I’m pretty sure El didn’t eat all of it. Kid sure knows how to eat, you’d never know by looking at her, but I think she was purposefully restraining herself so there’d be some left over for you.” He pauses for a second. “Come on kid, put your bag down and come sit down, I’m not gonna bite.”

Blushing, Mike drops his bag down on the floor with an unceremonious thud and slips into the chair that El had just abandoned. Her half empty plate is in front of him, syrup drowning a waffle and eggs scattered around the edges of the plate. Hesitantly, he picks up the extra fork that’s been placed on the countertop and puts a couple of pieces of egg into his mouth.

“Listen, kid -” El’s dad starts once Mike’s taken a couple of bites and

Mike feels his leg begin to bounce ferociously under the counter, causing his chair to begin to shake. He already doesn't like where this is going.

"I'm sorry." Mike blurts, not one hundred percent sure what it is he's apologizing for. El's dad doesn't seem to have a clue either, based on the confused look that takes over his features. "Sorry, sir, I don't know I'm apologizing for, but I'm sorry. Sir."

"Mike." The older man stops Mike's word with a simple movement of his hand. "It's okay. Also, you can drop the 'sir', makes me sound old." Mike tries so hard to make sure that his features don't betray his slight amusement, luckily, El's dad pushes on. "Hopper is just fine."

Hopper, god, even El's last name was absolutely adorable.

"Ok, sorry Hopper, I mean, uh, I'm not sorry?" Mike can already tell this conversation is going to be an absolute trainwreck. He just wants Hopper to rip the bandaid off so he can put Mike out of his horrible, awkward misery.

Hopper chuckles lightly with a small shake of his head. "Listen, Mike." Mike gulps. "El seems to think very highly of you despite the fact that you two have only known each other for nine hours." Mike feels his skin burn with blush at Hopper's words, praying to *god* that Hopper doesn't pick up on why, even though he probably most definitely does. "And I trust her judgement on most things, and I want to help you."

That's definitely *not* what he had been expecting. Luckily, or maybe unluckily, Mike's not totally sure, Hopper doesn't give Mike any real time to determine what he means by "help" and Mike is going to have to do to get it. He continues speaking before Mike has time to form any kind of response.

"But, I can't help you if I don't know anything. Now, I don't know how much you told El, she didn't tell me anything outside of the fact that your name is Mike and she found you in the bus station." Mike felt his cheeks blush, cursing himself for having such a reaction when El's name was mentioned. "So, I just want to know what your story is, kid. You don't have to tell me anything, I don't need all the gory

details, but I do need something.”

Mike took a deep, shaky breath. Despite the fact that everything that had happened with his mom and sister had happened months ago, he had never said anything about it to anyone. It had been such big news in Hawkins that he never had to, everyone just kind of knew, which meant Mike never had to talk about it. After the whole thing had become old news, something dramatic and gossip worthy taking its place - Mrs. Kingston sleeping with her son’s middle school English teacher definitely got the town talking, and was more fun to whisper about than the untimely death of a mother and her young daughter.

“I...um....” The words caught in Mike’s throat. He could feel tears gathering in the corners of his eyes and rubbed them, not wanting to start crying in front of El’s father. He cleared his throat, desperate to chase the incoming sob away. He thought about the words that he wanted to say, the words he wanted to scream from a rooftop.

My mom and sister are dead. It’s my fault and no one would miss me if I was gone, so I left.

The words fail to come though and instead Mike feels his heartbeat begin to increase and he feels like he can barely breathe. His breaths are coming out shaky and his vision is blurring and he wonders how long it will be before he passes out. There’s a firm hand on his shoulder, however and Mike lifts his eyes to see El’s dad looking at him, concern swimming in his eyes.

“It’s alright, kid.” He says, squeezing Mike’s shoulder. “You don’t need to tell me the story if it’s too hard, I get it.” Mike nodded, wordlessly, grateful for the older man’s kindness. “I gotta ask you though.”

“Yeah.” Mike croaks, tears hot and thick in his throat.

“Anyone know you’re gone?” Mike thinks back to his empty, cold house. He thinks about Holly’s closed bedroom door. Nancy’s neatly made bed that hasn’t been slept in for months. He thinks about the cold engine of his mom’s station wagon.

He shakes his head. Hopper sighs.

“Will anyone be coming to look for you?” Biting his lip, Mike ponders this. He knows the guys will notice he’s gone, but he doesn’t know how hard they’ll look for him. He doubts they’ll call the police, especially not in this area. His dad on the other hand?

His dad doesn’t even notice him when he’s there, he doubts his dad will notice he’s gone.

“No.” Mike says softly after a second, wiping at his face where he feels wet tear tracks. His eyes don’t look up to meet Hopper’s, but the hand on his shoulder squeezes again.

“El, get in here I know you’re out there.” Mike glances towards the door, where El pops out from behind the door frame. She looks unashamed that she was caught, quickly making her way over to Mike’s side. He quickly wipes at his face and sits up, slightly embarrassed that she probably totally saw him crying.

However, El merely smiles at him. He can’t help but give her a small, sad, grin back.

“Did you decide?” She asks softly, looking to her dad, expectantly. Mike feels his eyebrows come together in confusion. Decide what? Something about *him* ? Had El and her dad been talking about him?

Hopper sighs, moving his hand from Mike’s shoulder. He crosses his arms across his chest and nods. “I did.”

“And?” Mike’s eyes flick to El, who has an eyebrow raised. She looks almost like she’s challenging her dad. Mike gulps. He still doesn’t really know what they’re talking about, but considering the way Hopper’s eye are now looking at him, Mike has a very big feeling it has to do with him.

“I think Mike should stay with us for a while.”

If Mike had been confused before, it was nothing compared to now. In fact, at first he was pretty sure that he had misheard Hopper, or imagined the words that had come out of his mouth. He sat up in his seat, leaning forward across the table.

“What?”

Hopper rested his forearms on the table, looking at Mike. “Look, kid. I’m not saying that this is going to be a permanent thing or anything like that, but, I think it’s the best thing to do right now.”

Mike snuck a glance at El, who had a small smile on her face before directing his attention back to her dad. “I’m confused, why are you letting me stay here? Not that I’m not grateful or anything, but I don’t really understand why.”

“I know that when El let you stay here last night, she told you that she would take you back to the bus station today, am I right about that?” Mike nodded, wordlessly. “Do you have a plan for where you’re going?”

Mike opened his mouth, but quickly closed it, not wanting to lie. He shook his head.

“That’s why, kid. You have no idea where you’re going, and I can’t in good conscious let you go to the bus station when you don’t have any kind of plan.”

Mike supposed that made sense, but if that was the case then why wasn’t Hopper forcing him to go home? That was pretty much the last thing that he wanted, so he wasn’t going to argue, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t confused.

“But,” Hopper continued. “Hearing what I just heard from you about no one coming to look for you, I don’t think sending you back home is going to help anyone either. I’m not saying that I’m gonna let you live here forever, but I think you staying here is best until we can figure something out.”

“R-Really?” Hopper nodded.

“I may be a police officer, but I’m also a father.” Hopper’s eyes went to El and he smiled. “She was the one who wanted you to stay, I just agreed with her.”

Crinkling his eyebrows together, Mike looked up at El who merely shrugged. “I may have suggested it.” Not waiting for any kind of

response from anyone, El then shuffled away from the table, grabbing Mike's bag, which was still discarded on the floor. "I'm gonna go put this back in the guest room."

Without another word, she darted from the room, disappearing out of sight. Hopper snorted and Mike felt a small smile making its way onto his face.

"You'll get used to that." Hopper said, pointing in the direction that El had just disappeared. "El, I mean. She's a little weird, but you'll get used to it."

Mike could tell by his tone that Hopper was using 'weird' affectionately and he smiled, even though it squeezed at his heart a little bit. He couldn't remember the last time he had ever heard his dad say something like that about him. Looking down, he swallowed roughly, determined not to cry again.

"I would follow her if I were you. If you don't intervene soon, she's gonna unpack all of your stuff and put it in the last place you'd ever look for it." When Mike looked at him, Hopper only could lift his eyebrows, taking a sip of his coffee. Taking the hint that Mike was supposed to leave the table now, he pushed back from his seat.

"Thank you." Mike said, shoving his hands into his pockets. "For, uh, you know. Everything. Breakfast, letting me stay, you know."

"It's not a problem, Mike."

"Well, I really appreciate it. I don't want to be any kind of burden and I'll leave whenever you want me to, sir." Mike could feel himself on the verge of a ramble and clamped down on his tongue in an effort to resist continuing to blab.

Hopper held a hand up, stopping whatever Mike's unfiltered brain was going to spew. "You're not being a burden kid, alright." Mike didn't say anything, merely biting down on his lip and rocking back and forth on his heels. "Now get out of here before I change my mind."

"Yeah, sorry." He winced. "Thank you again, uh, sir." He winced

again. Deciding to just shut up, Mike nodded, turning away from the table and quickly retreating from the room.

“Hey Mike,” He spun slowly on his heels. Was Hopper already regretting his offer? “If you’re gonna live here, you gotta stop calling me sir.” Because he didn’t know what else to do at this point, Mike could only laugh slightly. “Now, I’m serious, get out of here.”

Turning back around on his heels, Mike hurried from the room and made his way to the stairs. He could hear El upstairs, no doubt doing what Hopper had just warned him about and Mike smiled.

He had a very good feeling about this.

Notes for the Chapter:

this chapter ended up going in a direction i didn't originally plan, but i really like it!!! hopper was fun to write, but i'm a little nervous i didn't quite nail him. i probably will stick with mike's pov for most of this fic, with occasional glimpses into other characters.

anyways!! i hope you guys enjoyed! lemme know what you think!!! :)

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

hello pals!!! chapter three is full speed ahead!

i want to just say thank you again to everyone who has left kudos and comments on this fic!! your support has meant the world to me, and to know that people are interested and invested in this story makes me so happy! i'm sorry this took longer then i expected to get up, but it's a good chapter (at least i hope!).

as always a special thank you to ally (theparanoidergosphere) for reading this and giving me encouragement!

anyways, let me know what you think and enjoy!!

November 11, 1987

It took more than a couple of days for Mike to really adjust to staying with El and her dad. Even though El told him on multiple occasions to make himself at home, he still hesitated to do anything without any kind of approval first.

He always awkwardly hovered in the kitchen during meal times, waiting to be invited to sit down. He never made any kind of movement to use the bathroom at night until El would knock on the door of the guest room, telling him she was done and he was welcome to use it. Not to mention he had packed all his things back up in his backpack, not wanting to leave any kind of trace that he had stayed in the guest room at all.

Not to mention, he was still slightly terrified on El's dad.

Sure, Hopper was letting him stay here, and so far hadn't seemed to figure out that Mike had some weird crush on El that seemed to be growing stronger and stronger every day, but still there was

something about the *very tall* police chief that put Mike a little bit on edge. Not that he would ever show it though, he had a strange feeling El's dad would get a kick out of Mike being afraid of him.

All this awkwardness however, was nothing compared to the first time that Mike and El were left alone since he started staying with the Hoppers.

It was the Tuesday after Mike had left Hawkins and Hopper had been called into the station for the night, turns out he had asked for a couple days off so he could try and brainstorm some ideas of what to do, so it was his first time at work since Friday. El, who Mike learned wasn't currently in school, hadn't been too far from Mike's side in nearly four whole days, but her dad was always close by, so it kept things from being too awkward.

But tonight they would be left alone.

All night long.

Now, Mike wasn't a stranger to spending nights alone with any kind of adult. Hell, he was more used to it now than he ever been before because of how often his dad was out of town these days. Not to mention he had spent nights with his friends when their parents weren't home (turns out Mrs. Henderson loved visiting her sister and was always more than willing to let Dustin invite his friends over to their house while she was gone).

Never though had he ever spent the night alone, with a girl. Sure, him and El had spent every night since he got there only two doors down from each other, but her dad was always there (very *loudly* Mike might add, two sets doors and an entire hallway didn't do much to drown out Hopper's snoring). But tonight, there would be no snoring.

To say that Mike was freaking out would be an understatement.

If El was nearly as nervous as he was, she certainly wasn't showing it. Over a dinner of spaghetti and meatballs, she had smiled at him across the table almost the entire meal, making his heart threaten to beat out of his chest.

“So, you two gonna do something fun tonight while I’m gone?” Hopper asked around a mouth full of noodles. One thing Mike appreciated about Hopper and El was the lack of shame they had with each other. Mike would have never dared to speak with his mouth full in front of his mom, who would have lectured him about meal etiquette, or his father, who would eye him and refuse to answer him until he asked politely and properly.

El shrugged, taking a small bite of one of her meatball. “I don’t know.” She swallowed, looking at Mike with a smile. “Probably watch a movie or something, maybe make some hot chocolate and popcorn to go with it.”

Mike feels himself go warm, there’s nothing particularly scandalous about El’s suggested plans, but the idea of spending an entire night sitting in a dark room with El while they reached their hands into the same bowl of popcorn was enough to start to sweat a little bit. Hopper huffs softly, nodding his head.

“That mean I’m gonna come home and find you two making out on the couch?” Mike, who had been taking a bite of spaghetti, inhales sharply the noodles getting lodged in his throat. He coughs violently, slapping his hand to his chest. Across from him, El eyes him, concerned. He waves her off though, taking a sip of water and trying to slow his heart rate down.

“Haha, very funny.” El says to her dad, after Mike has stopped coughing. Hopper shrugs and Mike really can’t tell if he had been kidding or not. El’s sarcastic response makes him think that he was, but Hopper’s straight face makes him think that he definitely was *not* kidding.

“Hate to burst your bubble though, but the VCR is still broken so good luck watching a movie.” Hopper easily pushes the previous subject away, much to Mike’s relief. He had been afraid for a moment that if they had stayed on the ‘Mike and El making out on the couch’ train much longer Mike would end up dead, either from choking on his food or Hopper murdering him.

It takes him a second, but he finally registers what Hopper said, and for the first time during dinner, he speaks up. “I can probably fix it.”

Both pairs of eyes at the table look to him, El's wide and hopeful and Hopper's slightly narrowed. "You can?" El asks, smiling.

Mike shrugs, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, I mean, I'm president of my high school's AV club, so I know my way around basic technology." He can feel himself blushing with embarrassment, not many people were overly proud to be just a member of AV club, much less so the president.

"AV club?" El asked, her eyebrows crinkling together. Mike forgot that El didn't go to public school, so she probably had no idea what he was talking about. Hopper also looked confused, and Mike got the sense from that that Hopper probably hadn't been much of a nerd in high school himself.

"Audio visual club, we like fix technology and stuff." Mike says sheepishly. Even though El doesn't have any perception of popularity and high school cliques, she probably still thinks he's a total loser for being interested in stuff like that.

"Oh really? That's so cool!" Mike was incredibly grateful that this time he wasn't trying to eat or drink anything, because no doubt he would have choked again if he had been. El had a wide smile on her face and there was genuine enthusiasm and excitement swimming in her eyes.

He almost had to pinch himself to prove that he wasn't dreaming. Mike had never, and he had been AV club president since middle school, heard a girl say that anything about the club was *cool*. Especially not a girl as pretty as El, who could easily be one of the most popular girls in school if she attended school. It was a painful reminder that if him and El were in the regular world of public high school, she probably wouldn't give him the time of day.

"It's not that cool." Is the response that finally comes out of his mouth after he sits there dazed for a couple of seconds. El looks like she wants to argue with him, but her dad grumbles, interrupting.

"Well, I should be home in the morning." Hopper wiped at his mouth with his napkin, standing up from his chair. "I expect you to stay out of trouble, I don't want to come home to more teenagers living in this

house, alright?” Mike paled slightly at Hopper’s words, but he was looking pointedly at El from his place by the sink.

“No promises.” El teased, smirking at her father. Mike struggled to hold in a snort of laughter, amused by the way El wasn’t afraid to make fun of and tease her dad. Mike knew his dad would yell at him for trying to talk to him like that, although that would require his dad to acknowledge him in the first place.

Hopper chose not to respond, instead coming over and pressing a kiss to the top of El’s head. The gesture both warmed at and gnawed Mike’s heart. Hopper didn’t stop there however, he placed a firm hand to Mike’s shoulder, giving it a small squeeze before exiting the room. Mike smiled.

“Call me down at the station if you need anything, Flo won’t be there so it’ll go straight to me.” Hopper called from the front door. Both him and El turned in their seats to look at them, Mike giving a small nod and El waving.

He gave them one last look before disappearing out the door, it closing with a definitive *thud* behind him. The sound hovers in the air for a couple of moments before El sighs, standing up from her chair, wooden legs scraping the linoleum.

“You all set?” She asks by Mike’s shoulder. At first Mike doesn’t know what she’s referring to, because his mind is running a million miles per hour now that they’re alone in her house. He looks at her blankly for a second, but she gestures down at his half empty plate.

“Oh.” He nods his head. “Uh yeah, I’m all set.” She grabs his plate, but he stands too, following her to the sink. “Do you need any help?”

El shakes her head, beginning to scrub one of the plates. “No, I think I got it. Thanks though.” She smiles brightly at him and he feels his heart slam against his ribs. “You’re sweet.” She adds softly.

Mike isn’t expecting what happens next, so when El reaches out and grabs his hand, threading her fingers with his and squeezing them softly, he nearly has a heart attack. He gives her a tight smile, not really trusting any other instinct. El must sense his discomfort,

although Mike fears she misreads it, because her hand drops from his, coming firmly against her own body.

He immediately craves her warm touch again.

Clearing his throat awkwardly, he shoves his own hands in his pockets, not trusting them. "Want me to go and see if I can figure out that VCR?" His fingers are twitching against his leg, begging him to reach out and grab El's hand again, so he thinks maybe putting them to work will keep his urges at bay.

Luckily, El smiles and nods at him. "Yeah!" She says brightly, the earlier awkwardness fading away almost instantly. "Are you sure you're gonna be able to fix it? Not that I don't believe in you, but it seems pretty broken." She bites her lip, and Mike thinks it's one of the cutest things he's ever seen.

"I mean, there's no harm in trying, right?" Truthfully, Mike is totally sure if he would be able to fix it, but he's fixed computers and his friend's put together an Atari console a couple months ago, so a VCR should be no problem. At least he hopes.

El looks nervous, almost like she fears she's asking him too much. Mike doesn't want to admit to her, or himself for that matter, that she could probably ask him to move mountains for her and he would. As long as it meant she would keep smiling at him.

"I just don't want to make you feel like you absolutely have to fix it." El says softly. Mike grins.

"It's fine, El, really. Just consider me fixing it a payment for letting me stay here." Honestly, Mike would feel grateful for something like this. Considering how awkward he's felt the last couple days sleeping in a bed that's not his and eating food that belongs to someone else, fixing the Hopper's VCR is the least he can do. "And if I can't, then you can throw me out on the street."

The comment is supposed to be a joke, but El only frowns. "That's not going to happen. Trust me." Her words are sincere and remind him of their conversation in the car just a few days ago when she had promised that her dad would let him stay.

"Thanks." He says sheepishly, looking down at the ground. His fingers are tapping against his thigh in his pocket and he's itching to put them to work.

"You're welcome." El says, he looks up just in time to see her smile. "Do you need anything to fix it?"

"Um, probably just a toolbox." A standard toolbox doesn't have the same exact tools that the AV club uses to fix things, but a VCR is a pretty common piece of technology that he should be able to get the job done with just a regular wrench. "Your dad seems like the type that would have one."

El laughs softly, nodding her head. "That he does." Mike chuckles. "It's in the entryway, up against the wall. Just holler if you can't find it."

He nods, moving away from her. His heart and body scream at him to stay rooted to the spot and continue looking at her, but his brain guides him towards the entryway.

"Mike," he turns, El smiles. "Thanks again."

There's a wide dopey grin on his face. "No problem El." He swallows. "Anything you need just let me know."

El doesn't respond, just giving him another blinding smile. Mike tries not to make it too obvious that he's ready to melt into a puddle on the ground. Not trusting himself to say anything, much too scared that he would accidentally tell El he's in love with her or something equally as embarrassing.

Instead, he turns around and runs into the wall.

He hears El laugh behind him, the bright, clear ringing through the hair until the clap of her hand over her mouth cuts it off.

Not wanting to turn around and reveal the deep blush that's crept onto his face, Mike takes a deep breath, aligning himself and walking out into the hallway as quickly as he can without sprinting.

El's light laughter returns once he's a distance away from her and as

it fades into the distance, he can't resist the small smile that makes its way onto his face. He supposes embarrassing himself and risking possible injury to his face, and head, is worth it if it makes her laugh.

His heart hammers happily against his ribcage, reminding him that not everything is so bad.

Forty five minutes later Mike and El are sitting side by side on the couch in the Hopper living room, Ghostbusters playing on the screen in front of them.

Mike is definitely *not* focused on the movie.

When they sat down, El's smile wide because he had managed to fix the VCR, Mike hadn't expected them to be sitting so close together. Of course, they hadn't started out this way, Mike making sure there was a good six inches, at least, in between them, both for her comfortability and his own sanity, but they kept moving closer together, like magnets. Now, everytime one of them adjusted, their shoulders would brush and Mike's entire body would feel like it was on fire.

He tried his best to focus on the movie, it was one of his favorites and he had been excited when El had suggested it, but it was *hard* to say the least when El was right there and her skin kept touching his and Mike was so sure if he moved his foot over even an inch they would be playing footsie. He wondered if El was freaking out as much as he was, if her skin was tingling as much as his was or if she had the same high pitched buzzing in her ear.

"Probably not you wastoid." Mike thought to himself, swallowing and biting his lip when El moved against him, her hip pressing into his upper thigh. *"Unlike you, she's a normal human being and doesn't freak out over human contact."*

Shaking his head, Mike did his very best to push all thoughts of El's

body against his and focus on the movie. However, this proved difficult as El was *incredibly* distracting, not to mention, the movie was gnawing at his heart in a way that was making him uncomfortable. In fact, he kinda thought if he watched it for much longer he might start crying.

It's just - Ghostbusters was Dustin's favorite movie and Mike still kinda felt like shit for ditching his friends and leaving them to worry about him. Not to mention how much Holly had loved the theme song, always humming it at the breakfast table.

"Who you gonna call?" Mike remembers asking her one morning, only a week before the accident. He felt tears well in his eyes as the memory of his baby sister's blinding smile and bright giggle flooded his senses.

"Ghostbusters!" His dad had yelled at them for disturbing his read of the morning paper, but his mom had smiled fondly at them, her hand rubbing Mike's shoulder. At the time, Mike had turned slightly red with embarrassment but now he would give anything to relive that morning.

God, he missed them so much.

Feeling tears wetting the corners of his eyes, Mike rubbed his face, pushing his hair back from his eyes. He needed a distraction. Remembering El's earlier words of popcorn, Mike stands abruptly, causing El to eye him with confusion.

"I'm gonna go make some popcorn." He says quickly, leaving the room before El has time to question him. Moving swiftly through the downstairs of the Hopper house, he feels himself breathe when he hits the light, cool air of the kitchen. The living room had started to feel dark and suffocating, Mike had found it hard to breathe, like he was drowning in memories and guilt.

Sitting down at the small kitchen table, he lays his head in his hands, taking a deep breath. The cool air fills his lungs and he keeps taking in breaths to stop the hot tears that threaten to fall from his eyes. He doesn't know how long he sits there, his forehead pressed against the ball of his hands, his elbows digging into the wood of the table, his

chest heaving as he breathes.

It can't be too long though, because before he knows it, he hears the tv click off in the other room. Of course El realized that he definitely *wasn't* making popcorn. Lifting his head, he wipes at his face, giving El a small smile when she appears in the doorway of the kitchen. Mike braces himself for the "*is everything okay?*" and is prepared to lie through his teeth, but it never comes.

"You know, I tried to go to public school for a while." El says moving into the room and taking the seat next to him at the table. Mike watches her as she moves unable to keep his eyes off her, however, he knits his eyebrows together in confusion at her words. She gives him a small smile. "Hopper adopted me the summer I turned thirteen, and he enrolled me in school for the following year. I was so excited to finally be able to go to real school and be a real girl, but on the first day, about twenty minutes into the school day, my teacher turned the light off so she could show a movie and I freaked out."

Mike swallows roughly, his heart hammering as he listens to her. He doesn't know or understand why she's telling him this, but he's entranced and he hangs onto each of her words.

"I ran out of the room so fast." She chuckles softly, looking down at her hands. "I didn't even ask if I could leave, I just ran. I ended up hiding in the bathroom until a teacher found me and called my dad." Her eyes find his momentarily and he watches her take a deep breath. "My dad wanted me to try and go back, but the next morning I refused to leave my bed. So, that marked my first and last day of public school."

El's voice goes quiet and she's looking wistfully off to the side. "Sometimes I wish I had gotten out of bed the next day and had the strength to go to school but," she shrugs and Mike has to resist the urge to reach out and wrap his arms around her. "I didn't. Too late to go back now."

Mike nods, his fingers tapping against the side of his jeans. "Do you ever regret not trying again the next year?" He doesn't know what possess him to ask such a personal question, but he really *didn't* want the subject to switch to him, not yet at least.

She considers this, putting her chin in her hand. "Sometimes." Mike tilts his head, trying to encourage her to elaborate. "Sometimes I wish that I had started high school and done all the normal high school things like joining clubs and eating lunch in the cafeteria like I see on tv, but I still have friends, well a friend, I have a job, I still do pretty normal teenage girl stuff.

"Besides, I get to see my dad try and teach me how to do basic math and that's pretty much ten times better than anything I could ever see in high school." She laughs and Mike joins in with her. Admittedly the image of her burly police chief father trying to understand basic algebra does amuse him, but it's mainly the tinkling sound of her laughter that causes him to smile.

"Long story short, I get it." El says once the laughter has died down. Her voice is soft and understanding and before Mike knows it, her hand is reaching out and squeezing his shoulder. "My dad always says that the memories and the flashbacks are just proof that you made it out. That if you hadn't, there would be no memories to have."

"Sometimes I wish I hadn't made it out." Mike admits softly. He doesn't know what inspires him to admit something like that. Maybe it's the soft lighting of the Hopper kitchen that makes him feel safe, maybe it's the light buzzing of the refrigerator in the corner that reminds him of Saturday mornings or maybe it's the way El is looking at him, making him feel like he can say anything and she'll listen and understand.

Quickly he shakes his head, pushing his hair back from his face. "It's just, things were so much better, before. It's hard to look at now as any kind of improvement." He sighs, his breath shaky. There are tears in the corner of his eyes again and he really doesn't want to start crying in front of her.

"Well, sometimes things have to get worse before they can get better." El says quietly, giving him a small, understanding smile. "I know that sounds horribly cliché and it sounds like something the doctor Hopper made me see would say, but it helps to remember that sometimes." She shrugs.

Mike isn't really sure how to process her words, his mind still buzzing and reeling. "My little sister used to love the Ghostbusters theme song." He feels his lips twitch in a smile. "Her and I used to sing it together at the breakfast table."

El is still smiling at him, her hand moving from his shoulder to his forearm. She doesn't squeeze this time, but just the firmness and weight of her hand, a reminder that he's not alone, is enough encouragement.

"My dad would get so irritated, he would fold down the top of his newspaper, glaring at us. I was old enough to know what it meant, but Holly wasn't. She would stick her hands on her hips and not give in until my mom would finally intervene." Mike laughs a sharp, humorless laugh. It's how he stops himself from crying. "She would tell us to stop, but she would be smiling at us, so I knew she wasn't actually like angry or anything."

It's the most Mike has talked about his mom or sister since the accident. His friends never bothered to bring them up, knowing they wouldn't get anything out of him, and people around Hawkins had quickly learned that bringing them up to Mike in casual conversation usually didn't end very well. One situation with Mrs. Anderson that included Mike tearing up in the Melvad's Department Store line and running into the back room, breathe shaky and hands trembling until Mrs. Byers' shift ended and she brought him home, was enough to get that across.

"Your sister sounds really cute." El says after a couple beats of silence. Her voice is quiet and soft and genuine. "And your dad sounds like an ass." She adds. It's not what Mike is expected and he chokes on a chuckle of laughter.

"She was. And trust me he definitely is." He's full of laughing now, unable to contain it. His laughter, however, quickly turns to sobs. Choking and shaking, he feels hot and wet tears roll down his face. This time, he doesn't even have the energy to be embarrassed or try and stop himself.

He doesn't know how long he sits there, bawling. The collar of his t shirt is damp with tears, and his entire body is trembling. El is still

holding his forearm, her thumb rubbing against his skin, comfortingly. It helps ground him and eventually, he's able to begin to breathe normally again, his sobs fading into hiccups and his tears slowly dissipating.

"I'm sorry." He mutters, his voice hoarse. El is shaking her head before he even finishes his sentence.

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Mike. It's okay." Her hand moves down his arm to his own hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. His heart clenches in his chest.

He wipes his free hand against his cheeks, desperately trying to rid himself of the tracks on his face and leftover tears still gathered in his eyes.

"This is just really embarrassing and I feel like a total wastoid crying like this." Truthfully, the whole thing had been kind of cathartic. He hadn't cried that hard in, well, ever, he doesn't think. At least not since he was a kid. After what happened, he bottled up all those emotions and hardly ever let himself shed any tears. He didn't know what it was about El, about this house, that made him so vulnerable.

Didn't change the fact that it was totally embarrassing and he probably had like snot dripping from his nose that El was too nice to tell him about.

"Mike." His gaze at drifted to his feet, even his socks at gotten splashed by his tears. He didn't look up at her voice, but when her hand moved to his chest he lifted his eyes to meet hers. "There's nothing to be embarrassed about." She gave him a small, encouraging smile. His heart fluttered. "Everyone cries sometimes."

He could feel himself rolling his eyes and El scoffed. "No, I'm serious." Looking at her, he could see sincerity shining in her eyes. "Crying is totally natural and there's no reason to think you're a so called wastoid because of it."

Mike chuckles softly at the way El says wastoid, like it's foreign and she doesn't understand what it means. "I just, I haven't cried that hard in what feels like years, and probably has been." He admits,

rubbing his hand against the side of his face and grinning sheepishly.

“Then it was probably a long time coming.” El smirks. She moves her hand again to his shoulder and gives it a small squeeze. Mike is pretty sure if she keeps moving her hand around his skin is going to burst into flames. “The therapist my dad made me see when he adopted me told me that a really long, good cry was the first step of recovery.”

“I guess that makes sense.” He whispers, and El nods.

“Everything is going to be okay.” Mike bites down on his lip. “I promise.”

And in the pale light of the Hopper kitchen, the bright moonlight shining, he believes her.

Mike can't sleep that night.

He spends the first hour and half of his attempted slumber tossing around in bed, constantly adjusting the pillow under his head and blankets around his body. He just can't stop thinking about his conversation with El. He curses himself for literally not being able to sleep because he's too busy thinking about the way a girl smiled at him, *god* could he be any more pathetic.

Was he really such a wastoid that he pretty much falls in love with the first girl who gives him the time of day and is actually nice to him? Whoa, wait, *falls in love*? No, no. He is not in love with El, he's known her for like four days. Sure, she's super pretty and she smiles at him whenever he enters the room and she always seemed to be watching out for him in a way that no one ever really has before, and his heart threatens to beat it's way out of his chest whenever he looks at her. Does that mean he's in love with her?

He doesn't want to answer that.

Before he can ruminate on anything El related any longer, he's jumped from his thoughts by a strangled gasping noise coming from the next room.

El

Shooting up out of bed, Mike moves swiftly through the room and into the hallway. Pausing outside of El's door, he wonders if he should even knock. Maybe she woke herself up because she had to go to the bathroom or something. He's about to turn around and go back to his room, embarrassed that he had such a strong reaction when he hears sniffles coming from the other side of the door.

Tilting his ear, he knocks quietly. "El? It's Mike." He hears her adjust on her bed, her sniffles stopping. A couple seconds later, the door is opening and El is standing in front of him. Her hair is rustled from sleep and her eyes are red and slightly bloodshot. A oversized t shirt covers her small frame and Mike swallows. Even at nearly 1 in the morning, she's still the most beautiful person Mike's even seen in his life.

"Mike? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, everything's fine. I just, I heard you wake up and I wanted to see if everything was alright."

El's eyes widen, but only for a moment, quickly returning back to normal size and she nods. "Oh yeah, everything's totally alright. I'm sorry if I woke you up."

It tugs at Mike's heart, that even after waking up from what Mike can only assume is a bad dream, she's still more worried about him then she is about herself. "No, you didn't wake me up. I was on my way to the bathroom." He lies easily, he doesn't know if El believes him but she nods.

"Well, everything's fine over here. I just had a bad dream." He can tell by the far off look in her eyes and the dried tear tracks on her face that there's definitely more to the story, but he doesn't want to push her on something she's clearly uncomfortable about. "They used to be a lot worse and I'd get them way more often so I'm used to

them.”

Mike feels his stomach drop slightly at her words. He’s dealt with nightmares before, definitely more so in the last couple months, but hardly ever has he woken up from them in tears.

“Alright, well if you need anything, you know where to find me.” Mike says, suddenly feeling awkward about knocking on her door. “Just, right over there.” He points awkwardly at the door to the guest bedroom, wincing. El giggles softly.

“I’ll be sure to remember that.” She says, smiling. “Goodnight, Mike.”

“G-Goodnight, El.” Mike stutters, mentally cursing himself. *God, do you always have to be such a monumental embarrassment to yourself, Michael.* Luckily, El doesn’t seem to notice, or she’s too nice react to it. Not wanting to embarrass himself any further, Mike turns on his heels, making his way back into the guest room.

“Mike.” He stops, looking over his shoulder. “Thanks for checking up on me.”

He grins. “Anytime.”

And he definitely, most certainly, means that.

Notes for the Chapter:

i had a lot of fun writing this chapter and i hope you guys had fun reading it!! i promise as we chug forward we'll learn more about what actually happened to karen + holly. i know some of y'all were wondering and i promise you'll find out soon!!

as always, let me know what you think! i hope you enjoyed! until next time :)

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

hello my beautiful fic reading pals!!! i hope the day is treating you well and this chapter finds you in good spirit.

i wanted to yet again give a huge thank you to everyone who has given me any ounce of validation on this fic, whether it be a comment, a kudo, a bookmark etc. it means the world to me!!! i'm so happy that people are enjoying this fic and want to read more in this universe.

as always, it seems, apologies for this taking so long, i was away for a little while and didn't have as much time as i hoped to write, BUT i'm really pleased with what i came up with. this chapter is a little different then the previous chapters, but i hope you still enjoy it.

thank you once again to my wonderful friend ally who always encourages me and gives me the greatest feedback. this fic wouldn't exist without her.

November 10, 1987

Hawkins, Indiana

When Will Byers woke up on Monday morning, it seemed just like any other day. He could hear his mom bustling around in the kitchen. His dog, Chester tail was thumping softly against the bottom of his leg, and the early morning sun was just breaking through his curtains. Not only was it just like any other day, it seemed like it was going to be a *good* day.

He had no idea how wrong he was.

Going through all the usual motions of getting himself up in the

morning, Will had a certain spring in his step that even his mom noticed.

“What’s got you all smiley this morning?” Joyce asked as Will was finishing packing up his backpack. Will shrugged, zipping up his bag and throwing it over his shoulder.

“I don’t know. It just feels like a good day.” With that, Will departed from his house, giving his mom one last wave before hopping on his bike and beginning his journey to school.

Like usual, Dustin was waiting outside of his house, finishing off his breakfast. He gave Will a jubilant wave, which Will returned.

Skidding to a stop, Will gave his friend a wide grin. “Morning, Dusty.” He joked, laughing as Dustin merely scoffed, mounting his bike on the street next to him.

“Whatever, Byers.” Dustin said, adjusting his backpack on his shoulders. “Let’s get going, gotta get to school early today.” Will raised an eyebrow. Dustin had been asking the rest of them more and more frequently if they could get to school earlier than their usual 7:30. Without fail, almost every single morning for the last few weeks, Dustin would ask and then disappear without telling them where he was going.

“Again?” Will tried his hardest not to sound annoyed because he really wasn’t. But Dustin always failed to mention this until the morning when Will was stopping by, which meant then they had to rush to pick up the rest of the party.

“Yes, again.” Dustin mocked, sticking his tongue out in Will’s direction. Will rolled his eyes. “But this is the last day, I swear.”

Will didn’t really believe that, but he laughed good-naturedly, nodding in Dustin’s direction. They then took off in the direction of Maple Street. The fall breeze felt cool and exhilarating on Will’s skin as they sped off towards the last two members of the party.

It wasn’t until they rounded the final corner that Will’s stomach went slightly sour and the first sign that today was definitely *not* like every

other day reared it's ugly head.

If today was just like every other day, Lucas and Mike would be standing at the end of Maple Street together. Usually they would be playfully arguing about something, like who the real hero of Star Wars is, or how a movie adaption of Lord of the Rings would *really* go. Lucas would be standing with his arms crossed while Mike fidgeted and gesticulated wildly, both of them laughing and dropping the argument as soon as they caught their friends approaching.

For the last couple months it had always been one of Will's favorite parts of the day, because it would be one of the few moments where Mike would have a genuine smile on his face, and wouldn't look like the the events of March were weighing down on him. Those moments were few and far between and Will knew he wasn't the only one who valued them.

Today however, Lucas was alone at the end of Maple Street.

Will caught himself glancing over at Dustin as he slowed on his bike, who caught his eye, both of them gulping. Lucas too looked troubled, his fingers tapping anxiously against his thigh, his eyes far off and unfocused. It had been months since Mike had done this.

"Hey, Lucas." Dustin said, cracking through that weird tension that had settled between them. It didn't break it though, Will could tell they were all on edge. Dustin kept glancing at the spot where Mike usually stood, tall and commanding over them.

"Hey guys." Lucas muttered, shuffling on his feet. Will's hands were deep in his pockets, his fingers nervously picking at each other. "You guys didn't have any trouble getting here did you?"

Will and Dustin both shook their heads quickly. Will didn't even have the heart to be annoyed, in fact, today it made his heart squeeze affectionately in his chest that even with the giant elephant nestled between the three of them, Lucas still made sure to check up with them. It had become routine, for Lucas and Mike to make sure that Will was able to get to them in the morning, and any other time they all met up together, safely. All because of that stupid incident back in middle school.

“So, uh, where’s Mike?” Dustin finally asked, pointing towards the area next to Lucas. Will knew they were all feeling the same, that weird, cold emptiness that they all felt when one of them was missing. “Is he sick?”

Will knew that wasn’t it, Mike had only been sick a couple of times since about seventh grade and Lucas would have told them that as soon as they got there if that was the case. No, Will knew something else was going on, something much worse.

Lucas shook his head, anxiously running his hand through his hair. “His dad’s car is gone.” He said with a nervous shrug. “And I didn’t see Mike’s bike anywhere. All the lights were off too. Doesn’t look like anyone’s been home for a while.”

Will’s heart plummeted. This was bad.

“Well, maybe he went to school already. Needed to get out of the house, away from his dad or something.” Dustin said. Will figured that probably wasn’t it. Typically Mike didn’t just go to school without telling them, besides Mike’s dad usually left pretty early, and through vent sessions late at night in Mike’s basement sometimes, Will knew that Mike spent most mornings and nights fending for himself based on how much time his dad spent not being home.

“When was the last time one of us talked to him?” Will finally asked, speaking up for the first time since meeting up with Lucas. The three of them all shared a glance, knowing that they all probably had the same answer.

“Not since Friday.” Dustin said, Lucas nodding in agreement. Will too hadn’t talked to Mike all weekend, too caught up in his own world. His mom had needed help cleaning, he had started a new drawing. He could tell by the looks on the faces of his two friends, that they too had gotten caught up in their lives and hadn’t even given Mike a second thought.

The hole in the pit of Will’s stomach grew deeper.

It was far from intentional, them not bothering to check in on Mike all weekend. It’s hardly like they ignored his phone calls, or drove by

his house on their bikes to do other things. But, that didn't make the guilt they all felt any more real.

"You guys don't think..." Dustin said quietly, breaking the silence. Will could sense where Dustin's mind was going and shook his head vigorously. Lucas's mouth dropped open ever so slightly, Will could almost see his friend's heart beating under his shirt and jacket.

"No." Lucas said firmly, crossing his arms across his chest. "He wouldn't do that." Will had to agree. No matter how shitty things had gotten with Mike's dad, he would never do something like that. Not without coming to one of them first.

It had been a hard couple months for Mike, and sometimes Will felt guilty. Guilty that he didn't try harder to get Mike to open up about it, guilty for not inviting Mike over more to get him away from his house. Guilty for still having his mom when Mike didn't. But he didn't think Mike would do something so reckless and impulsive without at least giving them some kind of warning. Warning so they could find him and stop him.

"So what, he just disappears without a trace. Takes his bike, never to be seen again." Dustin muttered. Clearly at this point, Dustin was speaking out of nerves and fear, not rationality. His words came from a place of concern and confusion and misunderstanding of their friend's thought process.

None of them had ever been in a situation like Mike's before. Sure, Dustin and Will both were without their fathers, Will's had left them and Dustin's was in the military, leaving him away from home more often than not. But for Will, it was easy to just resent his dad, besides his still had his mom and Dustin might miss his dad a lot, but he still gets phone calls and a promise that someday he'll be home.

Mike's mom had been taken from him. Ripped from his grasp, his baby sister too. Leaving Mike with a father who didn't love him, and a sister who needed to save herself by getting out.

"Look, we don't know where Mike is." Will finally said, trying his best to rationalize and assess the situation. "And it's not going to help anyone if we just stand here and immediately let ourselves jump

to the worst possible conclusions.”

“Will’s right.” Lucas said quietly, meeting Will’s glance and nodding. “We’re freaking out when we have no evidence one way or another that anything has even happened.”

“Exactly. For all we know, Mike did leave his house early and is already at school.” Will knew that wasn’t true, but right now, it was the best he had. “Hell, he’s probably getting more and more irritated by the second because we’re not there.”

A quick glance of their watches told them that they were now toeing the line of being late for first period.

“Well, wouldn’t want to keep him waiting then, would we.” Dustin said, a forced smirk falling onto his face. As the three friends mounted their bikes, there was an air around them that all of them ignored. They knew they were all putting on a facade, that they would get to school and Mike wouldn’t be there, but right now, it was all they had the strength and ability to do.

The ride from the end of Maple Street to school was long and quiet. Usually it was filled with laughter and jokes and racing to the bottom of the big hill right before the school came into sight, but today there was only the squeak of their bike wheels and the rustling of their jackets in the light fall breeze.

By the time they had arrived at school, Will’s hands were shaking. Dustin and Lucas shared a look when they noticed that Mike’s bike was still no where to be seen. Will gulped.

This time it was Lucas’ turn to try rationalizing the situation. “Maybe he busted his bike this weekend and his dad had to drive him to school. That’s why we didn’t see his bike at his house, because it’s in the shop or something.”

Will could see Dustin’s eyes downcast towards the ground, but he shrugged. “Yeah, maybe. Let’s just get inside.”

Pushing them both aside softly, Dustin made his way quickly into the school, disappearing around the corner before Lucas or Will could say

anything more. They shared a look, Lucas' face troubled and his bottom lip between his teeth, before they parted ways.

As Will entered his first period class, his teacher merely glancing at him before starting the lesson, his heart squeezed in his chest. He found himself spending a majority of the class period staring at the window, his mind a million miles away from the History lecture being given at the front of the classroom.

Mike, where are you?

The morning passed in a blur.

Will barely paid attention to what was going on in any of his classes and he could tell that Lucas and Dustin were having a hard time concentrating as well. None of them had caught a glimpse of Mike all day. It was easy to pretend that he could be there for the first couple periods, but it got harder and harder to ignore as the day ticked on.

By lunch, it was glaringly obvious and Will felt like he was going to burst into tears at any second. He could tell by the look on Lucas' face as he pushed his food around on his tray, that he too was finding their friend's absence disturbing.

"Guys, I have an update." The voice of their friend appeared out of nowhere, Dustin slamming his tray down on the table as he spoke. His face was flushed and his hair was a wild mane of curls. He looked like he had just run a marathon.

"Did you see Mike?" Will asked, inching forward on his seat. He doubted that was it, but it didn't hurt to ask. Dustin's face fell slightly and he pursed his lips and shook his head.

"Well then what the hell is your update?" Lucas asked, irritation laced in his words. There was a pause, none of them dared to look at each other. Finally Dustin took a deep breath, squared his shoulders and pressed on.

“You guys know Molly Callahan? The sophomore who Mike always complains about because she talks too much and is pretty much always gossiping during class?” Will and Lucas both nodded. While Mike hadn’t exactly been all rainbows and sunshine before the accident, more recently he had taken to complaining about pretty much everything and Molly Callahan was a pretty frequent victim of Mike’s bitching.

“What about her?” Lucas asked when Dustin didn’t elaborate right away. “Did she say she saw Mike somewhere?”

“Or was all of Mike’s bitching about her because he had a crush on her and he’s like hiding in her basement or something?” Will asked. He was kidding, he doubted that Mike would pull anything like that, at least not in this lifetime, but it felt good to make a joke, to make his friends laugh. It was something they all needed.

“Nah, she’s way too pretty for him.” Dustin said with a genuine smirk on his face. Lucas snorted, covering his mouth with his hand. “But anyway,” He waved the thought away with his hand, “Molly’s brother works at the police station and apparently they found a bike on the outskirts of town.”

Will’s heart hammered in his chest, the jest of the conversation evaporating in a flash. Dustin didn’t have to elaborate, him and Lucas could read between the lines. Mike’s bike was missing and now there was a bike popping up abandoned on the outskirts of town. It was all too perfect to be merely a coincidence.

“Guys, what if what almost happened to Will a couple years ago, actually happened to Mike...” Lucas said, voice trailing off.

Will’s stomach dropped and there was now an uncomfortable gnawing and biting as his heart. Him and Dustin both knew what Lucas meant, based on the hurried, nervous glance between the two of them. Will shifted in his seat, the cheap plastic of the cafeteria chair squeaking unsettlingly beneath him.

He thought back to that night in the woods. The fear and adrenaline that had pumped through his veins as he had run faster than he ever had before. The bounding of his blood in his ears. The sound of twigs

snapping around him as he had blindly sprinting towards the direction of his house. It had been the scariest night of his life, and he wouldn't wish anything like it on his worst enemy, let alone his best friend.

The three of them fell into an eerie silence. Dustin and Lucas were glancing at Will nervously, and Will refused to meet their glances, instead staring at the cracked and stained tabletop in front of him.

"Should we say something to the police?" Dustin finally asks, his voice low and quiet. "About knowing that it's Mike's bike..."

Will feels a sudden rush of anger in his chest, and he nearly jumps from his seat. "We don't know if it's Mike's!" He nearly yells, his voice much louder than he anticipated. Luckily the rest of the Hawkins High students drown him out to any outside ears, their conversations loud and full of laughter.

Dustin and Lucas look at each other, both of them seemingly understanding of Will's outrage. Lucas nods. "You're right, we don't." He says softly, making eye contact with Will. "We should still go to the police though, tell them that Mike is missing."

"But do we even know for sure that he's missing?" Will asks. He knows what his gut is telling him, that Mike is gone. He doesn't know where he is, but he knows that he's not in Hawkins anymore. But, a part of him is too scared to voice it out loud.

"If he's not missing then where is he?" Dustin asks, his eyebrows stitched together. "Besides, I don't think the police would take us very seriously if we went and told them Mike was missing."

They all ponder that for a moment and Will knows that Dustin is right. He knows that if the three of them tried to tell anyone at Hawkins Police Department that their friend was missing the officers would laugh in their faces. His stomach turns.

"Even if they did believe us, it's not like Mike's dad would be able to back us up. He probably hasn't even noticed Mike is gone." Lucas says, bitterness evident in his tone.

“Well what are we supposed to do then?” Dustin asks, frustrated. Will sympathizes and watches as Dustin runs his fingers through his hair, fingers knotting in his curls. “We can’t just sit around and do nothing.”

Will takes a deep breath and tries to compartmentalize and figure out the best course of action. He can feel both Dustin and Lucas’ eyes on him, but he does his best to block out the feeling of their gazes.

“I think we should go to Mike’s house after school. Maybe he’ll be there and be able to explain everything, maybe he won’t. We should just look around, see what we can figure out.” Will says, locking eyes with both of his friends. “If we have enough evidence that something has happened we can go to my mom and she’ll be able to help us.”

“Do you think the police would believe your mom if she told them Mike was missing?” Dustin asks, picking nervously at his fingernails. Will shakes his head, frowning.

“I don’t think so. I think they would probably only believe Mike’s dad.” Will says. “But, it wouldn’t hurt to have an adult who knows what’s going on and she’ll be able to help us.”

That seems to be enough for the time being for Lucas and Dustin as they both nod slowly and a silence falls over the three of them. While they’re discovered a course of action, Will can tell that none of them are feeling any better about the situation. The discovery of a bike popping up on the outskirts of town certainly has just put all of them even more on edge and no matter how much they try and convince each other, and themselves, that everything is fine, they all know it’s not.

“So, we’ll meet outside after school and bike to Mike’s house and start getting to the bottom of this.” Lucas says after a few beats of silence between them. Will nods and Dustin hums in agreement.

They all share a determined look, Will pushing away the nerves and anxiety and guilt that’s still settling in his stomach. Now, he’s running on pure determination and he can tell his friends are too.

They’re going to find Mike, he knows they are.

School ends and Will is fairly certain the three of them have never exited school grounds faster.

It seems like only mere seconds after the final bell that him, Dustin and Lucas are flying towards Maple Street, the fall breeze brisk and chilling. It seems only natural that a day like today would be a day where a deep chill would settle over Hawkins, like a bad omen of things to come.

Will hates to admit it to himself but it reminds him of the days leading up to Karen and Holly's accident. It had been a pretty easy late Winter, with the last of the bad snowstorms coming and going, the ice beginning to melt and the sun starting to warm the town. Then, Hawkins had been hit with the worst cold spell late March had ever seen, top that off with the massive three day snowstorm that had been partially responsible for what happened to Mike's mom and sister and you have a recipe for disaster.

He can only hope that this time around will have a better ending.

They arrive at Mike's house in record time, the house looming over them. Will feels a chill go down his spine and he can tell by the looks on his friends' faces that they too feel uneasy.

"Should we knock on the door? It doesn't look like anyone's home." Dustin whispers loudly. "What if Mike is here and he's like upstairs crying or something."

Lucas reaches over and socks Dustin in arm, causing him to yelp. Will can't help but grin slightly, a small laugh escaping his lips.

"You knock on the door, I'm gonna go around and see if Mike's in the basement." Lucas says. "Will, you go around the other way and see if you can spot anything, we'll meet back here in a couple minutes."

The three friends go their separate ways and Will can hear his heart thumping in his chest and the blood pounding in his ears and he

inches his way around the Wheeler house. It doesn't look like anyone's been home in days, the garage is locked up and the whole place looks untouched. He gulps.

He doesn't know if he's relieved or disappointed when he returns back to the front of the house minutes later with nothing to report. Dustin is looking similarly disappointed or relieved as he sits on the front stoop of the house, his arms resting on his knees.

"Nothing?" Will asks as he approaches and Dustin shakes his head with a small sigh.

"Didn't hear anything either, so it's not like Mike was home and decided not to come to the door." Will sighs, feeling bile rising in his throat.

"Hey, I think I might have found something." Lucas calls to them as he appears from side of the house. He sprints towards them, stopping in front of Dustin and gesturing around the corner. "There was no one down there, but all the stuff from last week's campaign is all scattered all over the place, which means that Mike probably hasn't even been down there since Wednesday."

Will and Dustin share a look and Dustin stands from his spot on the stoop.

"You mean..." Will starts, shifting nervously on his feet. Lucas nods, unable to meet his eye.

"That means that Mike probably hasn't been home since Friday." Dustin makes a strangled noise and Will feels his hands go limp as his sides. "We all know that Mike hates being in his basement when it's all cluttered like that, and we also know he likes to hang out down there on the weekends, so if he had been home this weekend, it probably would be cleaned up."

The three of them fall silent, the wind whistling loudly around them, rustling the trees and making Will feel all the more uneasy. He can tell that his friends feel the same and the absence of Mike falls heavily on all of their shoulders. Will knows they feel some degree of guilt, even if they have nothing to feel guilty about.

“Well, I think we know what this means now.” Dustin says after a couple of minutes. He has his shoulders squared and a look in his eye that makes Will excited, nervous, scared and determined all at once.

Lucas raises his eyebrow and Dustin smirks. “Now, we find Mike.”

November 12, 1987

Hopper Residence, Indianapolis, Indiana

“Mike, did you have any friends in Hawkins?”

El’s question comes out of nowhere, so much so that Mike almost drops the plate that he’s drying. He’s glad that he doesn’t, because these are nice plates and he doesn’t want to feel even more in debt to El and her dad by shattering one of their plates. El however, doesn’t seem phased at all, continuing her washing job without even giving him a glance.

“Do I really strike you as that much of a nerd that I wouldn’t even have any friends?” Mike asks, slightly sarcastic. He knows El means no harm with her question but it still makes him think if El, who is hands down the prettiest and nicest person he’s met, really thinks he’s that much of a nerd that he doesn’t even have any friends.

Luckily El shakes her quickly and vigorously. “Of course not!” She exclaims, reaching over and attempts to push his shoulder slightly. Mike dodges her, her hands covered and soap and water, laughing as El frowns at him. “You just never mention any friends, that’s all.” She shrugs simply, handing him a plate to dry.

For a moment, Mike is distracted by the simple act to even consider her words. The whole thing is so *domestic* and *homey* that it makes his forehead start to sweat and his heart beat erratically in his chest. There’s a brief moment where Mike imagines them doing this every day for the rest of their lives. The feeling hits him like a tidal wave and causes his chest to cave and he physically has to shake his head

in order to rid himself of the feeling.

“Well, I can say on good authority that I have friends back in Hawkins.” Mike says, setting aside a plate and swiftly taking the next one from her hands. “Three of them, to be exact.”

Mike catches El grin out of the corner of his eye. “What are they like?” She asks sweetly, turning slightly to look at him, her smile now full and bright.

He hesitates slightly, not knowing where to begin. First he feels a crushing explosion of guilt in his chest as he thinks of his friends, who he left behind without any kind of warning. But, sometimes it even feels like he’s slipping away from them and they might not completely notice if he disappeared the way that he did. It’s something he completely blames himself for, falling further and further into the shell he had created, so he almost feels as though he did his friends a favor by leaving. Now they wouldn’t be burdened by his sadness.

“They’re pretty great.” He finally says, a ghost of a smile creeping onto his face. “Will, Dustin and Lucas.” He adds after a second.

“Are they just as big a nerds as you are?” El asks and Mike gasps in mock offense. El is grinning widely at him, her tongue stuck out between her teeth. Mike hits her lightly with the dish towel.

“Haha, very funny.”

“I know I am.” El says with a smirk, knocking Mike lightly with her hip. Mike has to try and pretend like the physical contact doesn’t make his entire body break out into a sweat, the mere touch of their bodies sending his adrenaline into overdrive. Luckily, El doesn’t seem to notice.

That or she’s just way too nice to say anything.

“No, seriously.” She says after a moment, looking at him. “I want to know about them.” Her voice is soft and her eyes are wide and doe eyed as she looks at him.

Mike feels his mouth twitch into a smile, his heart fluttering at the

way she's gazing at him. "Well," he clears his throat, "to answer your question, they are just as big of nerds as I am. Dustin probably more so actually." He chuckles softly.

El giggles and Mike swears he's never heard a more beautiful noise in his entire life. She doesn't say anything though, so he takes that as a prompt to keep talking.

"We used to spend pretty much every weekend just holed up in my basement, playing video games and DnD." He shrugs. "Not to mention that none of us really have any other friends and we're the sole members of the AV club."

Mike realizes that he's rambling now and sneaks a glance over to El, whose eyebrows are stitched together in confusion. He puts the plate that he's drying down and swallows roughly.

"What's DnD?" She asks after a couple seconds. Mike feels himself go red. Of course El wouldn't know what the hell DnD was. She wasn't a huge loser like he was and probably actually did things in her free time that weren't lame.

"Dungeons and Dragons, it's just some dumb fantasy roleplaying game. We've been playing it since we were kids." He mutters, picking up another plate and beginning to wipe it down. "It's not very cool or exciting or anything." He shrugs.

"Hm." El says, maneuvering herself against the counter so she can be facing him. "I've never played before, how do you play?"

Mike sneaks a glance at her, sure that she's making fun of him or being sarcastic. But, her tone sounds earnest and her face is pinched curiously. "You seriously want to know how to play DnD, it's pretty complicated."

"Well, just give me the basics then." She says with a smile. "I want to hear about it if it's something that you're interested in, Mike."

His heart flips in his chest. "It's basically just, like I said, a fantasy roleplaying game. Everyone has a role, and the dungeon master kind of manipulates the story." Mike feels himself stuttering through his

words, but El is still looking at him, and he feels like he has to keep talking. "I'm the dungeon master, so I pretty much write all the different campaigns."

"You write the whole thing?" El says, her eyes wide. Mike can't tell if she's excited or weirded out, but then a smile spreads across her face and there's a spark of excitement in her eyes. "That's so cool."

"Yeah, I guess." He mutters, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. "Like I said it's pretty lame, but it's something I've always liked doing."

He's looking down at the counter, trying to avoid El seeing the blush on his cheeks so he doesn't see her move closer to him. It's only when she's so close he can feel her that his entire body feels like it's going to erupt in flames.

Her hand grazes his arm and Mike fears his skin is going to burst into goosebumps the size of mountains and that El will be so weirded out she'll rip her hand away. But that doesn't happen, instead Mike forces himself to look at her and she smiles softly at him.

"I think that's really cool." She says, her voice quiet and right near his ear. He can practically feel her breath on his skin and he swears he feels like he's going to melt into a puddle. Mike turns his head slightly to look at her, her face only inches away from his own. He wonders if the weird tension between them is something that she feels too.

"And before you tell me I'm lying, I'm not. That really does sound cool." She adds, clearing her throat. Mike can feel the tips of his ears burning with red hot embarrassment, but El smiles at him, even as she steps away slightly and he can't help but give her a small smile back.

"You know," He starts, unsure how he wants to word this so she doesn't think he's not only a total nerd but also a gigantic creep and weirdo, "you're a mage."

El looks at him blankly, confusion etched throughout her face. "I'm a what?"

“Mage.” He says, taking a deep breath. “It’s a DnD classification. I’m a paladin, Will’s a cleric, Dustin’s a pard, Lucas is a ranger.” El nods, still clearly not understanding what he’s trying to tell her. “You’re, you’re a mage.”

“A mage.” She says slowly, like she’s testing the word out on her tongue. Luckily, she doesn’t look too weirded out by the whole thing, even if her confusion is evident. “Isn’t that some kind of witch or something like that?”

“Yeah, something like that.” Mike says, surprising himself when he feels a smirk falling onto his face. “Mage’s are pretty powerful, they’re jus really passionate about their magic.” Mike shrugs. He knows the real reason that he wants tot ell El that she’s a mage is because everything she does seems magical to him, and that the way his heart fluttered whenever she was near him seemed to be anything but ordinary.

No, if there was anything that Mike had learned in his five day stay with the Hopper family is that El was absolutely spell bounding.

“So, you think I’m passionate?” She asks, a small smile on her face.

“Yeah, I do.”

They look at each other and as if the talk of magic hadn’t been enough, Mike swears he feels the earth move beneath them, almost as if something in the universe as shifted. He knows it’s probably just him who thinks so and El’s small smiles are just out of the kindness of her own heart and nothing more, he still feels something in heart and his soul that feels a whole hell of a lot like falling in love.

For the second time that evening he imagines what he would be like to be with her forever, and how much he wants that. He’s only known her for five days but at this point, life without her seems absolutely pointless.

“So did you really mean what you said earlier, about not having any friends outside of these guys?” El asks after a couple seconds, bringing Mike crashing down and back to the conversation at hand.

Mike feels himself blush. "Yeah, I'm not exactly popular or anything. I'm pretty much just a nerd with three friends."

"Now that's not true." El says, crossing her arms. This time, it's Mike's turn to be confused. El must be able to tell by his face that he's confused because she playfully rolls her eyes. "You don't have three friends."

"Yes I do." Mike says. "In case you missed that whole story, there are really only three people who share the same interests as me and actually want to be my friend."

"That's a lie." El insists and Mike wonders where she's going with this. "You don't have three friends. You have four." Mike gulps. "You have me."

Then El smiles brilliantly and Mike feels the air rush out of his lungs. "Yeah, I guess I do."

They share what feels like a secret grin and suddenly the world melts away and it feels like the two of them are the only two people who exist on this planet. The moment passes quickly and El returns to washing the remaining dishes, but Mike can't stop looking at her.

Oh yes, he thinks, his heart hammering, this is definitely what it feels like to fall in love.

Notes for the Chapter:

so, originally i had never intended to write that whole dustin, will and lucas section BUT i did and i'm really pleased with it and so many of you guys had been asking about the rest of the party so i decided to give them their time to shine. i hope that even though there was only one mileven scene you still enjoyed it.

as always, let me know what you think! i sincerely hope you enjoyed it! until next time my friends! :)

ps. if u ever feel like hitting me up on tumblr you can find me at the url finnwolfhards.